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'A right, a duty'

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This morning began in East Jerusalem with security forces on full alert. The Palestinian uprising, which began in early December in the squalor of the Gaza Strip, has spread to the West Bank, and is firmly entrenched among the streets and shops of the old city, holy to all three major Western religions.

This is the Muslim sabbath. One week ago the occupation army lobbed tear gas into the midst of families gathered for prayers in Islam's third most venerated mosque. Al-Aqsa ranks only behind the sacred places in Mecca and Medina for those who believe in the same One God as Jews and Christians, but rely on the teachings of Muhammad.

The occupation power claims no such desecration occurred. It persists in its denial, despite testimony from a Canadian journalist inside the mosque at the time, and the photographic evidence of a television crew who videotaped soldiers in the act of firing the gas bombs.

This willingness to controvert self-evident truth has become the occupation regime's principal weapon, since it ordered its soldiers to abandon their practice of answering stones with bullets. In an all-out effort to suppress the facts, the media, domestic and foreign, have been forbidden entry to large sections of Gaza and the West Bank. Reporters and cameramen have been beaten, their film and notes confiscated.

In the name of restoring order, refugee camps, under the protection of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, have been cordoned off, with women — and only women — permitted out for a single hour each day to find food for their families.

There are no allegations of actual starvation in the camps, but, according to neutral observers, hunger is widespread. For this unhappy state of affairs, the occupation power fingers the many Palestinian merchants who have remained closed down. No explanation is offered for how opening the shops would help families who are not permitted to leave the camps.

To increase the pressure, scheduled shipments of U.N. food supplies have been interrupted. "We have feeding programs for mothers and children and health care programs," said a U.N. spokesman. Some days the relief agency's trucks are permitted past the military force's barriers, but never according to schedule, and only for a very limited time. On other days the camps go unfed.

Meanwhile, in this country, apologists for the occupation regime have begun their bluster of attempted justification. Their principal defense seems to lie in citing past repressions in other countries, but those acts have already been condemned by the decent elements in humanity. Furthermore, no court has ever permitted past crimes as an acceptable excuse for present crimes.

What is happening to the Palestinians is a crime that predates any incidents I have seen cited by those apologists. Under the 1917 Balfour Declaration which the occupation power uses to justify, in the world's eye, its very existence, the people now in Gaza and the West Bank were promised "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine..."

Their uprising resulted from having their civil and religious rights trampled for decades, especially during the 20 years their remaining slice of Palestine has lain under alien occupation. They have been treated as sub-humans, and within their own land, a land which their ancestors lived on long before Moses led the exodus from Egypt. Their ancient Biblical name, Philistines, survives in today's Arabic word for their land, Falastina. But they were Palestinians at least a thousand years before their common tongue became the language of the Koran.

Today's show of force around their principal mosque may work; we will not know until tonight's new stories. But the use of armed might to instill a tranquility buys a false peace, one that will not last.

In the last years it ruled Palestine, Britain pioneered all the techniques of repression being currently practiced. There are men in leadership positions in the occupation government today who should have learned first-hand from the English failures. Their unwillingness to profit from their own examples may be the greatest mystery in the present unhappy situation.

In the coming months, it takes no gift of prophecy to forsee more blood where too much has already been shed. If this Muslim sabbath passes without violence, other Fridays will follow. The muscles of tomorrow's stone throwers are being strengthened inside the blockaded camps, and within the occupying power's jails.

When sons and daughters see their mothers and fathers beaten, when children learn they can find dignity only in fighting back, when they grow up knowing salvation for their very lives lies only within themselves, then wounds become proud badges. Death itself holds no terror.

If much of the world has forgotten the killing and dying in 1943 Warsaw, I have not. A ragtag collection of men and women, buttressed by children and a few aged, stood off the might of the surrounding Nazi army for months. The ghetto fighters refused to surrender because life no longer held hope for them. Were they alive, those men and women would understand today's Palestinians.

In a recent Parade Magazine (Dec. 27, 1987) essay, the man who received a Nobel prize for writing on the Holocaust, wrote: "When a people loses its freedom, it has a right, a duty, to employ every possible means to win it back." In that single sentence, Elie Wiesel captured the motivating spirit that drives today's Palestinians into the streets.